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Johnson, Thomas H. "Stuck in the Big Muddy." *The Middle East Journal* 66.4 (2012): 723-733
<http://hdl.handle.net/10945/49304>



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Book Reviews

Stuck in the Big Muddy

Review Article by Thomas H. Johnson

When More is Less: The International Project in Afghanistan, by Astri Suhrke. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011. 256 pages. \$25.

Power Struggle In Afghanistan: An Inside Look at What Went Wrong and What We Can do to Repair the Damage, by Kai Eide. New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2012. 320 pages. \$24.95.

The Long Way Back: Afghanistan's Quest for Peace, by Christopher Alexander. New York: Harper-Collins, 2011. 320 pages. \$25.99.

No Worse Enemy: The Inside Story of the Chaotic Struggle for Afghanistan, by Ben Anderson. London: Oneworld Publications, 2011. 304 pages. \$24.95.

Little America: The War Within the War in Afghanistan, by Rajiv Chandrasekaran. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2012. 384 pages. \$27.95.

For those who follow the conflict in Afghanistan on a regular basis, it almost seems as though the United States and NATO-led International Security Force (ISAF) blunder from one strategic disaster to another. From the desecration of Qur'ans and the dead bodies of Taliban fighters to the tremendously alarming growth of "green-on-blue" or "insider attacks" (fratricide) — 51 in this year alone, as of mid-September — there has been no shortfall of mishaps. Add to these a series of high-profile assassinations, spectacular attacks in Kabul mass prison escapes, \$910 million vanishing from the Kabul bank in "mysterious insider loans," and the recent announcement that the US military is suspending ground-level operations with Afghan troops. It is therefore not surprising that Western public support for the Afghan War has waned, with 53% of Europeans and 44% of Americans favoring *immediate* withdrawal.¹ Several recently published books on Afghanistan chronicle the enormously complex and deeply flawed Western efforts to bring peace and stability to this war-torn country.

Astri Suhrke's *When More is Less* is a detailed, trenchant exposé of Western peacebuilding efforts in Afghanistan since 2001. The principal question she raises is how Afghanistan reached the point where the US commander of Combined Forces in Afghanistan warned in late 2009 that NATO was on the verge of losing the war (p. 2). To answer this question, she dissects the forces, dynamics, and contradictions associated with the West's "grand international project" in Afghanistan. Suhrke contends that the international community's liberal modernization agenda pursued in a deeply conservative, traditional society was bound to, and indeed did, engender resistance.

Suhrke begins by reminding the reader that "about two-thirds of all aid was channeled

1. Simon Tisdall, "Western Support for Afghanistan War Collapsing, Survey Shows," *The Guardian*, September 12, 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2012/sep/12/western-support-afghanistan-war-collapsing>.

through an ‘external budget’ administered directly by foreign donors ... The result of this huge infusion of capital [was]... massive corruption, poor governance, the uncertainty of economic growth in the aid bubble, a steadily expanding insurgency and mounting violence that affected combatants and civilians alike” (p. 1). Contradictions between the goals of this massive liberal peacebuilding effort and the realities of the war on the ground had a “corrosive effect on the entire peacebuilding project,” according to Suhrke. Efforts to pursue reform and protect human rights clashed with military pursuits (p. 15), and the lack of security hindered development. State-building became overly ambitious, in “striking contrast to the narrow and specific aims of the Bush Administration when it invaded the country in late 2001” (p. 23). The “sheer size of the aid sector created extreme dependence, weak local ownership and corruption” (p. 119). By mid-decade, foreign donors, for all practical purposes, had created “a rentier state unparalleled in Afghan history and nearly unique in the world of international assistance” (p. 120). Moreover, the massive size of the aid sector created weak local ownership and corruption. Quite simply, the amount of aid money flowing into Afghanistan overwhelmed the country’s social and international capacity to absorb it in any legal and socially acceptable manner (p. 133). This, in turn, undermined the Afghan government’s legitimacy, allowed for the continued prominence of warlords and perpetuation of human rights abuses, and a wide variety of other calamities (p. 225).

Suhrke also argues that the costs and unintended consequences of the foreign military presence contributed to the growing frustration, anger, and anti-foreign sentiments among the Afghan people (p. 70). This was especially evident with respect to civilian casualties and Kabul’s and the Afghan population’s reaction to them. Interestingly, she compares the Afghan experience to the assessment that Leslie Gelb renders in *Vietnam: The System Worked*: “The leaders were aware that the war was going badly and after a certain point did not expect to win militarily. Nevertheless, they allowed the impression of ‘winnability’ to grow in order to justify their already heavy investment and domestic support for the war. The strategy was to persevere” (p. 4).

The costs and unintended consequences of the decade-long foreign presence and occupation directly contributed to frustration among the population as well as to divisive ethnic politics (p. 161). While much of this was directly attributable to “task creep” during the Bush Administration, Afghanistan quickly reached a point where “the US-led engagement touched fundamental national security interests that went far beyond the significance of Afghanistan itself” with “the entire apparatus harnessed to a strong belief in social engineering” (pp. 6–7). Suhrke forcefully argues that “the puzzle in the Afghan case is not the incoherence of the international engagement, but an apparently systemic bias towards deeper and broader involvement in response to emerging signs of problems, rather than drawing back, taking stock, and exploring radically different alternatives” (p. 9). Indeed, according to Suhrke, NATO got caught in a “rhetoric trap” whereby the future of the alliance was seen as dependent on a successful outcome in Afghanistan (p. 11). This was complicated further by the fact that the United States started to behave like an occupation force — searching villages without informing local authorities, violating fundamental cultural codes, and destroying property (p. 55). This behavior allowed the Taliban to create a powerful narrative that the US and its allies were in fact “foreign invaders” intent on destroying Islam. Meanwhile, Suhrke notes, the Taliban became a formidable enemy whose strengths were “speed and decisiveness of information, organizational capability and operational reach, power to intimidate, increasing ability to provide shadow governance and growing sophistication in conducting complex attacks” (p. 63).

As revealed in this book, the overriding lesson is that “more” has been “less” — whether in the legal and political field where early interventions after 2001 were direct but ineffective or counterproductive, or in the economic and military area, where the heavy footprint did not appear until the second half of the decade but likewise had multiple negative consequences (p. 229).

Kai Eide’s *Power Struggle Over Afghanistan* is a personal account of the Norwegian diplomat’s two years (2008–2010) as the UN Special Representative to Afghanistan and the political head of the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA). He describes his remarkably close and frank relationship with President Hamid Karzai. As such, his

account is a brutally honest narrative of an insider who witnessed the war from a perspective limited to few. He begins by explicitly stating that he was not able to achieve what he had sought to accomplish in Afghanistan. He ascribes much of this failure to his growing disagreement with Washington's Afghanistan strategy and the lack of coordination between the United States and the United Nations and even NATO allies (p. vi). Interestingly, Eide argues that the West has never truly understood Afghans because they "exist in two very different worlds" (p. vi). This has resulted in mistrust and lack of meaningful coordination and dialogue.

Like Astri Suhrke, Kai Eide found the international aid effort to be extremely problematic. "Nobody seemed to really know the amount of aid flowing into Afghanistan, and nobody knew where it was spent and for what purposes" (p. 42). According to Eide, there was no overall development strategy. The lack of a strategy fostered a "dependency culture [that became] an obstacle to Afghanistan's development" (p. 140).

Eide believes that although UNAMA had a strong and ambitious UN Security Council mandate for coordinating civilian and military assistance, it lacked the financial resources and personnel to implement it (p. 30). This resulted in the lack of a clear direction by the international community and a lack of coordination among Western governments.

Eide also attributes the development dilemma to the "blurr[ed] line between military and civilian activities" (p. 46). He suggests that this became increasingly problematic for civilian-donor institutions, as graphically demonstrated by the Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) strategy. "When the PRTs were first established they were meant to be temporary structures. Instead, they had become permanent and competing structures, slowing down the development of Afghan institutions instead of accelerating it" (p. 46).

Keide was impressed by the work of the Afghan-led National Solidarity Program, which launched 52,000 projects in 27,000 villages. On the other hand, he found the Afghan National Development Strategy (ANDS) overly ambitious — "so comprehensive, it lacked focus and allowed donors to continue their policies unchanged based on their own priorities" (p. 54).

Many of these problems could be directly linked to the immediate post-Taliban period, when development was attempted "on the cheap." In the first five years following the fall of the Taliban, Afghanistan received development aid amounting to \$292 per capita compared to \$1,528 for Iraq. Moreover, the problem was exacerbated by the fact that at least 40% of civilian assistance was spent on donor-country services and consultants (p. 44). Eide personally witnessed consultants/advisors with annual salaries of \$500,000, paid by international donors working next to Afghans supporting the same ministry who were paid \$1,500–2,000 per year.

Turning to military affairs, Eide suggests that considerable strife existed between the UN and US on issues related to "collateral damage" (i.e., civilian casualties). This was vividly demonstrated in August 2008 when 90 civilians were killed in Azizabad, a village in Western Afghanistan. He states that the UN's "experience with the US military during this incident reflected a pattern we had seen before and we would see again. At first, the United States or ISAF would deny that civilians had been killed in an incident. Later, they would reluctantly be forced to admit that they had been wrong and that there were civilian casualties" (p. 65).

A good portion of this book involves Eide's discussion of the elections held in Afghanistan during his tenure, especially the August 20, 2009 Afghan presidential election where ostensibly 41 candidates vied for office. The most prominent of these were Hamid Karzai (incumbent Afghan President), Dr. Abdullah Abdullah (the United Front candidate, ethnic Tajik, former Northern Alliance leader, and former Afghan Minister of Foreign Affairs), Dr. Ashraf Ghani Ahmadzai (former Afghan finance minister and leader of the Afghan diaspora), and Dr. Ramazan Bashardost (an ethnic Hazara and former Afghan Planning Minister). Eide spends considerable time discussing the massive election fraud and what it meant for the country: "Votes had been received from polling centers that had never opened [...] One polling center had an identical number of votes in each polling station, a number that was far above the number of ballot papers the center had received" (p. 174). Eide suggests that Karzai "could never be reelected if he did not manage to obtain support from a significant portion of the other ethnic groups, Hazaras, Tajiks, and Uzbeks" (p. 152). However, this claim is highly debatable.

According to *The Economist*, “three interlocking factors shaped the 2009 Afghan Presidential Election Day: large disparities in turnout across the country; the threat of Taliban violence;² and allegations ... of systematic electoral fraud on behalf of Mr. Karzai.”³ In addition to these factors, the elections also demonstrated that kinship and ethno-linguistic dynamics continue to be the bedrock of traditional Afghan social and political relations and, as such, play a critical role in shaping allegiance as well as patron-client relationships. In the 2009 Afghan presidential election, no candidate received significant support outside of his particular ethno-linguistic group. This undermines Eide’s proposition that Karzai received significant votes across all Afghan ethno-linguistic groups as well as Karzai’s proclaimed image as protector and father of the Afghan nation.

As shown in Table 1, candidates received the bulk of their votes from provinces in which their respective ethnic identities were in the majority, with correlations (r) of ethnic provincial voting ranging from 0.53 to 0.80. These results are statistically significant (p), suggesting that the results could not have occurred randomly.⁴ Though causation cannot be determined, the results clearly indicate that ethnicity continues to play an overriding role in Afghan political affairs. This is particularly evident among Pashtuns⁵ and Tajiks. Pashtuns voted primarily for the two leading Pashtun candidates — Karzai ($r=0.79$) or Ahmadzai ($r=0.66$) — and against the Tajik candidate, Abdullah ($r=-0.71$). Similarly, Tajiks voted overwhelmingly for Abdullah ($r=0.80$) and against

2. In Kandahar, the Taliban released a series of “night letters” instructing voters to stay home on election day. In one letter, the Taliban warned: “Dear citizens, we are warning you not to participate in the election. If you do, you will fall prey to our operations.” See Matthew Fisher and Mike Blanchfield, “Afghanistan Clamps Down on News Media; Reporting on Violence Halted. Government Doesn’t Want Key Election Disturbed by Images of Destruction,” *The Gazette*, August 19, 2009. Baghlan and Kunduz were also greatly affected by violence, where of the incidents that took place in 2009, 42% and 31%, respectively, occurred in August alone. (Figures are based on data collected from the Worldwide Incidents Tracking System, <http://www.nctc.gov/site/other/wits.htm>).

3. “Afghanistan’s Presidential Elections: More Votes than Voters,” *The Economist*, August 27, 2009, <http://www.economist.com/node/14323170>.

4. Analyses such as the one presented here are often criticized as possibly in violation of the “ecological” or inference fallacy that warns against making inferences about the nature of specific individuals based on aggregate or group data. Sociologist William Robinson coined the term “ecological fallacy” in his article, “Ecological Correlations and the Behavior of Individuals,” *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (1950), pp. 351–357. Here, he argued that it is incorrect to assume that variables observed at the aggregated or ecological level are the same at the individual level. This does not mean, however, that associations, such as those presented here, are necessarily defective. Rather, it suggests that the process of aggregating or disaggregating variables or data may conceal variations and that researchers need to be aware of this. In “Is Aggregation Necessarily Bad?” *Review of Economics and Statistics*, No. 42 (1960), pp. 1–13, Yehuda Grunfeld and Zvi Griliches argue that “[I]n practice we do not know enough about micro behavior to be able to specify micro equations perfectly. Hence empirically estimated micro relations ... should not be assumed to be perfectly specified ... Aggregation of economic variables can, and in fact frequently does, reduce these specification errors. Hence, aggregation does not only produce aggregation error, but may also produce an aggregation gain.” It should be realized that the analyses presented here are not interested in individual behavior; rather the study is interested in ethno-linguistic group voting behavior. And the results recognized by the analysis presented here is similar to those found in earlier Afghan elections that were assessed. Moreover, the findings presented are also supported by numerous qualitative discussions of Afghan politics that suggest the prominent role of ethnic affiliations in Afghan political life. For example, see Barnett R. Rubin, *The Fragmentation of Afghanistan* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002).

5. We are well aware that the Pashtuns, as well as the other Afghan ethno-linguistic groups do not necessarily represent homogenous groups. In the case of the Pashtuns, numerous sub-tribes and *khels* (clans) are relevant, and these sub-groupings often have inconsistent political views and desires. Pashtuns consist of five large confederations — Durrani, Ghilzai, Ghurgusht, Karlanni, and Sarbani — each of which traces its roots to a single ancestor.

Karzai ($r=-0.64$).⁶ While ethnic Hazaras tended to vote for Bashardost ($r=0.53$), they did not explicitly vote against other candidates, although there was a significant, but not overly strong, anti-Karzai Hazara vote ($r=-0.37$). Unlike the 2004 election when Uzbek warlord Abdul Rashid Dostum was the fourth-leading Afghan presidential vote-getter, there was no prominent Uzbek candidate in the 2009 presidential elections. Ethnic Uzbeks tended to vote mostly for Abdullah ($r=0.34$) with no strong correlation of Uzbeks voting against the other three leading candidates or ethno-linguistic groups. Although the Uzbeks form at most 5% of the Afghan population, they are both ethnically and linguistically distinct from the other three groups in the study, and serve here almost as a kind of control group. When no candidate represented their ethnic interests, their votes were balanced among the three main candidates of the other ethnicities. The results from this group thus demonstrate in the negative the primacy of the ethnic factor in voting; in other words, only if it is not present can other selection criteria factor into the voting decision.

Table 1: Correlation Coefficients (Pearson r): 2009 Afghan presidential candidates at the provincial level and ethno-linguistic provincial votes received (%)

	Karzai	Abdullah	Bashardost	Ahmadzai
Pashtun	0.79 ($p<0.0001$)	-0.71 ($p<0.0001$)	-0.30 ($p<0.05$)	0.66 ($p<0.001$)
Tajik	-0.64 ($p<0.001$)	0.80 ($p<0.0001$)	0.06 ($p<0.50$)	-0.29 ($p<0.06$)
Hazara	-0.37 ($p<0.05$)	-0.06 ($p<0.50$)	0.53 ($p<0.001$)	-0.32 ($p<0.05$)
Uzbek	-0.26 ($p<0.07$)	0.34 ($p<0.04$)	-0.08 ($p<0.55$)	-0.36 ($p<0.05$)

Source: Official Afghan election data used in this and following analyses were drawn from: Official IEC Data and National Democratic Institute, <http://afghanistanelectiondata.org/open/data>; Provincial Ethno-linguistic data are from <http://www.aims.org.af/>; Ludwig W. Adamec, ed., *Historical and Political Gazetteer of Afghanistan*, 7 Vols, Vols 3–5 (London: HMSO, 1914; rev. and rep. Graz, Austria: Akademische Druck-u. Verlagsanstalt); *Afghanistan: The Northern Provinces* (Silver Spring: The Orkand Corporation, 1988), chap. 3; *Afghanistan: The Southern Provinces* (Silver Spring: The Orkand Corporation, 1989), chap. 4; and *Afghanistan: The Western Hinterland Provinces* (Silver Spring: The Orkand Corporation, 1989), chap. 4, as well as expert judgments for some provinces.

These results suggest that Afghanistan faces an extremely difficult political challenge of unifying a fragmented society and fostering the development of a national identity, as each ethnic group is attempting to gain a foothold in government, often at the expense of other groups. Because this attempt at entering government is taken from an ethnic approach, rather than a national one, the fragmentation of society will continue until either one dominant ethnic group controls all of the governmental power, or ethnic politics make way for increased internal conflict. It also directly contradicts Eide's statement that, "The president's [inauguration] speech lived up to expectations. He underscored that the voters had cast their votes in a way that transcended ethnic lines much more than during the first presidential election five years ago" (p. 241).

Kai Eide is quite critical of Counterinsurgency (COIN) in Afghanistan that he believes General Stanley McChrystal "oversold." He argues that in most instances that "build" and "transfer" (part of clear, hold...) was out of reach. "The new U.S. strategy rightly placed

6. Tajiks did not have a strong negative vote against Ahmadzai ($r=-0.29$); most of the Tajik voters disdain was clearly aimed at Karzai.

more emphasis on transferring responsibility to the Afghans. However, training between 350,000 and 400,000 Afghan army and police — mostly illiterate — through courses of a few weeks duration and enabling them to take responsibility for Afghanistan's security by 2014 was simply an illusion" (p. 230).

Eide concludes his narrative with a discussion of Pakistan, which "did not have an agenda for cooperation" (p. 271) and a low probability of success but need for reconciliation. He writes, "even after the killing of [Barnhuddin] Rabbani there is no acceptable alternative to a policy of reconciliation (p. 294) and negotiation with the Taliban. (The trends of the last years have demonstrated beyond any doubt that a military solution does not exist, p. 295). In summary, Eide returns to the point with which he opened his narrative: "To me these examples illustrate how different the Afghan society is from ours and how easily we can go wrong. They illustrate how cautious we should be in prescribing solutions that do not correspond to the realities of the Afghan society. If we are to succeed, we have to understand" (p. 308). It is interesting and ironic to note that General Azimi of the Afghan National Army responding to the supposed cultural underpinnings of green-on-blue fratricide recently suggested that the ANA would get increased "cultural sensitivity training" and begin using a 28-page leaflet entitled "A Brochure for Comprehending the Cultures of the Coalition Forces."⁷

The Long Way Back: Afghanistan's Quest for Peace, by Christopher Alexander, Canada's first resident ambassador to Afghanistan and later UN deputy special representative in Afghanistan, proposes a regional solution to the conflict in Afghanistan in which both Afghanistan and Pakistan become "subject to international supervision." He views the conflict in Afghanistan as a proxy war led by regional powers and calls for peace not only among Afghan factions but also between Afghanistan and Pakistan. He argues that a Central Asian version of the 1648 Treaty of Westphalia is ultimately needed to end hostilities.

He presents a brief historical reprise of Afghan history to remind the reader of the vast complexity of the problems facing Afghanistan: "From the beginning, the emerging nation of Afghanistan was fraught with many of the same problems that vex the country to this day, including incessant squabbling among various regional powerbrokers, doctrinal conflict between the Sunni and Shiite branches of Islam, and the mismatch between Afghanistan's borders and the lands historically controlled by Pashtun tribes" (pp. 6–7).

Much of the book is an indictment of Pakistan and its goal of "strategic depth" that Alexander believes is reason for "all manner of [Pakistan's] anti-Indian and anti-Western jihadis, even at the risk of Pakistan's own security; that remains the main engine of instability in Afghanistan" (p. xxx). He argues that "strategic depth is Pakistan's guiding doctrine" (p. 9) and that it has prompted a "neo-colonial" policy toward Afghanistan. He posits that Pakistan's "generals thought they had earned the right to call the shots in Kabul "because they were the "indirect authors of the Afghan *Jihadis'* victory over the Soviet Union" (p. 11). "Most of Pakistan's senior officers were raised during the era of the anti-Soviet jihad, and they still believed that support for the Taliban and the policy of creating strategic depth in Central Asia, was the only effective means to counter Indian influence" (p. 120). Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate (ISI) was the "golden thread" linking major Taliban commanders whom the Pakistanis used as "proxies to orchestrate a new push for influence in Afghanistan" (p. 119). Alexander argues that Pakistan is conducting a "proxy" war in Afghanistan because:

1. It wants to retain an influence in Afghanistan that had been building since 1979 culminating with the Taliban's rule from 1994 to 2001, when Afghanistan was basically considered a fifth Pakistani province;
2. Afghanistan is needed for commercial access to Central Asia and strategic

7. Rod Norland, "Culture Clash With Afghans on Display at Briefing," *The New York Times*, September 6, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/09/07/world/asia/afghan-and-american-culture-clashes-at-center-stage.html>.

- depth against India;
3. It must deter Indian influence and ambitions;
 4. Afghanistan is a pawn in Pakistan's rivalry with Iran over port facilities (p. 128); and
 5. Much of the aid that Afghanistan has been receiving should rightfully go to Pakistan (p. 128).

As a result of Pakistan's neo-colonialism in Afghanistan, Alexander argues that the US and her allies have not been fighting independent terrorists in Afghanistan but rather "proxies carefully nurtured on Pakistan soil" (p. 246). He is extremely critical of former president Pervez Musharraf and, more recently, Pakistani Army Chief of Staff Ashfaq Kayani, who, he suggests, "encapsulate[s] all of the maddening neuroses and ambitions of Pakistan's military establishment ... Like Musharraf, [Kayani] considered the Taliban's downfall of 2001 a disaster for Pakistan's national interest..." (p. 232). Furthermore, he claims Pakistan has been responsible for many of the spectacular attacks in Kabul, including the January 2008 attack on the Serena hotel, as well as the attack on the Indian embassy in July of the same year.

He concludes by suggesting, "the awful truth is that thousands of people have laid down their lives to make this emerging Afghanistan a reality. Everyone wishes the cost had been lower, and the long way back to peace less tortuous. But at every step of the way, we underestimated the entrenched forces arrayed against a stable Afghanistan, their roots planted deep in the history of the region... the victims of violence over the last decade have lost their lives, either directly or indirectly, because of a misguided Pakistani policy that treats Afghanistan as a mere pawn in an ongoing battle for regional supremacy against India. Conflict will not yield to peace in Afghanistan unless and until this policy is abandoned" (pp. 245–246).

Ben Anderson's *No Worse Enemy* is a powerful narrative that details the author's embed as a journalist and documentary filmmaker with a number of military units on the front lines of Afghanistan's Helmand Province during the period June 2007–January 2011. Anderson was involved in and writes of hundreds of military excursions to forward positions with UK Forces and US Marines.

His initial embed was from June to October 2007 with Queens Company, The Grenadier Guards of the British Army in northern Helmand. Unlike many embeds, who have told their Afghan stories from Forward Operating Bases (FOBs),⁸ Anderson spends little time on the large bases, such as Camp Bastion, where "most of the soldiers deployed to Afghanistan never leave" (p. 4). Instead, he is initially embedded with British infantry in small combat outposts. This allows him a unique vantage point from which to evaluate what the public is often told about the war in Afghanistan, as opposed to what is actually happening in the field.

During interviews with Afghans, Anderson found that the conversation inevitably concerned damage to people's homes and property or civilian casualties. His Afghan interlocutors invariably tell him, "all we want is security, whether you bring it or the Taliban. We are not supporting the war. We support peace and security. If you bring peace and security you are my king. If they bring security they are our kings" (p. 9).

Anderson found Afghans to be particularly critical of the Afghan police, who had the tendency to set up unofficial checkpoints and tax the people until they had amassed enough money to get "high" on narcotics or hashish. The situation was so bad that British police mentors suggested that 90% of the crime in Helmand was committed by the Afghan police (p. 15). The Afghan National Army (ANA) elements that Anderson encountered were not much better. He refers to the ANA as "a heavily-armed, badly-dressed version of the Keystone Kops on drugs" (p. 21). Moreover, he writes, the ANA had a proclivity to share information with the Taliban and steal from the British. Among items frequently stolen from

8. Anderson suggests that of the first 21,000 extra men Obama had sent into Afghanistan, only 4,000 were actually fighting to provide security. The rest were at secluded and isolated bases, in supporting roles (p. 72).

British rooms were pornographic magazines (p. 52).

Anderson found the British to be fairly competent in “clearing” areas around Sangin where local institutions were so corrupt that people had a tendency to side with the Taliban, but that they never “held” these areas for very long.

From July to August 2009, Anderson embedded with 2nd Battalion, 8th Marine Regiment. His initial comparison with his previous experience with the British was that “the British Army had shown incredible bravery and suffered horrendous losses, yet it was impossible not to see the US Marines, with their billions of dollars’ worth of new equipment, unlimited support, aggressive ambition, and unapologetic bluster, as the big boys coming home to take charge” (p. 60). He believes that “the Brits had a good understanding of what was going on . . . but never had enough combat power to do what they would like to do and sustain it over time” (p. 74). And ultimately, he believes that the Marines seemed to take the war more seriously than the British.

Anderson’s third embed was with the 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment from February to March 2010 during Operation Mushtaraq (“together”) to clear, hold, and build Marjah and return the area to “lawful” Afghan governance. This, of course, was General McChrystal’s counterinsurgency (COIN) model for the future of combat in Afghanistan.

Anderson speaks highly of Brigadier General Larry Nicholson, the Marine Commander in Helmand who appeared to be a “true believer” in COIN. However, not all of his men felt the same way as he about COIN, especially because of the restrictions that were put on the “rules of engagement” (ROEs). Essentially, these restrictions suggested that one could not engage unless “[he] saw an undeniably hostile act being committed” (p. 94). Most Marines believed that the Taliban took full advantage of the ROE by moving without revealing weapons, mobile phones, or radios and simply blended in with the population. COIN also generated considerable frustration among US Marine Corps forward air controllers because calling in an air strike required five levels of approval (p. 131).

Early on in the Mushtaraq operation, it was clear to Anderson that the mission was supposed to be made to look as though it were Afghan-led, though this turned out to be “a sick joke” (p. 107). The Marines found it frustrating to try to get the ANA to move, much less play a meaningful combat role. For example, “the ANA still did little except enter buildings first. Often they couldn’t even do that” (p. 165). This, and other examples of ANA failings, led Anderson to observe that, “the absurdly ambitious goal of having a national army able to secure every province of Afghanistan, on its own, by 2014, was a fantasy” (p. 173).

Anderson also found that many of the people of Helmand longed for the return of the Taliban. A fairly common trope was that “when the Taliban governed, there were no robberies. And they ran quick and fair tribunals to settle disputes. If you left them alone, they left you alone.” The only real bad things Anderson heard about the Taliban was that “they smoked too much marijuana and didn’t spend enough time with their families” (p. 122).

Anderson presents a fascinating narrative concerning the fight for Marjah’s most densely populated area — the Karu Charai village. While the fight itself was intense, once the Marines had secured the area the “hard part” of COIN was started when the “masters of controlled chaos and violence, had to become social worker, policeman, community project managers, anthropologists and judges” (p. 146). As he had found in previous operations, the people in Marjah were afraid of the police. Anderson states that: “The fact that the people being liberated were asking for protection from those we were fighting to introduce ought to have raised obvious questions” (p. 146).

In May 2010, a week after President Obama claimed that operation Mushtaraq was a model for cooperation between the US and Afghan Forces, McChrystal called Marjah a “bleeding ulcer” (p. 175). Anderson, having experienced the operation close and upfront, suggests that considering Mushtaraq as an Afghan-led operation backed by a massive media campaign “was the biggest fallacy of the entire operation. The Afghans were nowhere near ready to lead any military operation, let alone in the Pashtun south” (p. 175).

Anderson’s final embed was with the 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines from December 2010 to January 2011. In September 2010, the British forces quietly handed over to the US Marines

Sangin — the most dangerous district in the most dangerous province. Following the publication of the infamous *Rolling Stone* interview, General McChrystal was replaced by General David Petraeus, the “father” of the US COIN strategy. Interestingly, Petraeus loosened the ROE. “Between July and November 2011, there were approximately 3,500 air strikes, the highest number since the war had begun, and the number of night raids by Special Forces tripled” (p. 190). The arrival of US Marines in Sangin “led to more civilian deaths and an increase in support for the local Taliban who wanted to keep fighting. There had been a recruitment surge, as young men joined the Taliban to get revenge” (p. 191). COIN wasn’t playing out according to the Petraeus playbook — or maybe the playbook had changed.

The USMC 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines learned how deadly Sangin was: in the first three months, they lost 25 men and more than 140 were seriously injured — the worst toll suffered by any battalion anywhere in Afghanistan (p. 193–194). “The marines weren’t doing much mentoring of the ANA” that would have been expected during a COIN operation. Rather they “reluctantly drag[ed] a few soldiers with them on patrols [...] Even then, they barely tolerated them” (p. 206). In Sangin the Marines demolished homes and even a mosque. When asked about this destruction, a Marine officer responded, “I know that most people in the world probably wouldn’t understand. You’re trying to build a country up by destroying it and it seems like a paradox but those are people who have not been to Afghanistan. They don’t understand that the nature of conflict inevitably includes destruction before you can start to build it the way it should be, in a way that’s secure and provides a better economy for the people in the future” (p. 245). Such an opinion would seem to raise important, indeed critical, questions regarding US strategy and tactics in Afghanistan.

Rajiv Chandrasekaran’s *Little America: The War Within the War for Afghanistan* traces the war in Afghanistan from early-2009 to summer 2011 — from the Obama Administration’s troop “surge” to their drawdown. Particular attention is paid to USMC Brigadier General Larry Nicholson, who was determined to save Now Zad in northern Helmand, even though many in NATO and beyond (including his advisor John Weston) questioned the strategic significance of the area.

Nicholson, as suggested above, embraced COIN with zeal and was dedicated to implementing COIN for the 10,000 Marines under his command; he found COIN directives a bit excessive but nonetheless “implore[d] his Marines not to dwell on the rules; he would worry about them. But he urged them to be mindful of civilian casualties” (p. 39). He believed his Marines would make history while they worked from inside the community to protect the population and make the insurgents irrelevant. However, Helmand’s tribal dynamics were complex; moreover, the province was the world’s main producer of opium (p. 43). Another problem was one of perception: was it justified for Helmand to receive one-third of all surge troops when the province was home to less than 4% of the country’s population?

The Marines had the number of personnel needed to practice COIN tactics in places such as Nawa — 1,500 troops for a population of 75,000. This 1:50 ratio of Marines to population was consistent with COIN theory; and it allowed the Marines to set up two dozen small outposts near villages. The Marines were initially so successful in Nawa that McChrystal wanted 80 more “Nawas” in order to implement COIN throughout the country.

Nicholson also prompted his men to acquire effective COIN knowledge of tribal, social, and political relationships. He was especially interested in mapping the local powerbrokers. Following good COIN practice, he also issued directives to restrict use of air strikes and escalate force proportionately, all the while keeping his Marines off the FOBs (p. 75).

Not all commanders, however, embraced COIN. Chandrasekaran tells of Colonel Harry Tunnell, commander of the Fifth Brigade of the Second Infantry Division (the Stryker Brigade), who had a very “dim view” of COIN and believed “Military leaders must stay focused on the destruction of the enemy” (p. 153). The brigade, writes Chandrasekaran, made numerous tactical mistakes and, in a rather short time frame, suffered 21 casualties in Arghandab — the highest death toll of any US Army battalion in Afghanistan. It also charged five soldiers with murdering unarmed Afghans “for sport and keeping their fingers as trophies” (p. 161).

While Nicholson was excited about his COIN prospects, he found an extremely reluctant partner in the Karzai government. He was not alone in his concerns about Kabul. The Obama Administration, in general, regarded Karzai as, “a mercurial tribal chieftain who condoned corruption, neglected governance, tolerated warlords, and alienated allies. Karzai’s behavior seemed rooted in his insincerity and incompetence, but even more so in seven years of American mismanagement” (p. 83). This was explicitly evidenced by the fact that Karzai’s first anticorruption chief was an Afghan American who had been imprisoned for drug charges in Nevada for nearly four years (p. 88).

A tremendous problem facing the Marines as well as all of NATO, according to Chandrasekaran, was the fact that the Karzai regime was more corrupt than the Taliban. This raised the question of “how COIN could work when local [Afghans] were turning to the insurgents to protect them from their supposed protectors” (p. 118). Marines were also leery of ANA: “In the first few days, the only people the ANA soldiers shot were themselves — in the foot, the hand, the leg ... the Afghans smoked so much hashish and marijuana that intoxicating clouds wafted into night air” (p. 141). Moreover, the Afghan police were “rapacious” and were sent away by Nicholson. Chandrasekaran continues:

Nicholson’s year in Helmand felt like the most dynamic and entrepreneurial period of the Afghan War. After years of drift, the momentum was finally starting to swing America’s way. But was it sustainable? There were still too few competent Afghan soldiers and policemen. The Karzai administration was doing little to help build and sustain local government (p. 246).

The Marines found it particularly difficult to install competent local governments. For example, the first district governor for Marjah, ex-convict Haji Zahir, had spent four years in a German prison for trying to kill his stepson (pp. 142–143). Chandrasekaran suggests that the US never really seemed to know who it was dealing with and what type of message it was sending. He presents the example of a visit to Marjah by US Ambassador Karl Eikenberry, who had issued strict instructions that he not be photographed with Zahir: “Upon his arrival, the ambassador walked past the district governor without so much as a handshake. Then he embraced a former police chief widely regarded as a corrupt pedophile. Marjah residents couldn’t understand what message the top American diplomat in Afghanistan was trying to send them” (p. 143). Also problematic was that the Karzai administration was not a willing partner in most of the efforts to build local governments (p. 168).

Chandrasekaran is critical of the US Agency for International Development (USAID), whose staff, he found, were basically restricted to the US Embassy in Kabul and were extremely risk adverse. He argues that the amount of money available to USAID (\$4.1 billion for FY 2009) led to a push to spend money that “inevitably led to dubious projects and waste” (p. 194). USAID carefully watched “burn rates” and overhead rates. Their “security, management and overhead costs had grown to almost 70 percent of the value of most contracts by late 2010. That meant only 30 cents on the dollar was going to help the Afghans” (p. 198). While there were exceptions, such as the idealistic volunteer Summer Coish, the author found most of USAID’s staff to be overly bureaucratic and uninterested. But his criticisms of the civilian side were not limited to USAID. He contends that “from the outset, the civilian surge was bedeviled by a lack of initiative and creativity in Washington” (p. 180). Forty percent of US government civilians who were assigned to Helmand from July 2009 to June 2010 did not last six months” (p. 182). “The main effort in COIN is civilians, but they never signed up for it,” Brigadier General Ken Dahl tells the author. “So what we have,” he continues, “is folly: We have a counterinsurgency doctrine we can’t execute” (p. 330).

Chandrasekaran did find exceptions. For example, Carter Malkasian, the State Department’s representative in Garmser, learned the language and the Pashtun ways and was “uncommonly effective” (p. 184). This endeared him to the locals as well as the Marines, who often asked for his advice.

A major portion of the book also focuses on internal US government conflicts over COIN strategy, including key figures such as Vice President Joe Biden, the late Special Envoy Richard Holbrooke, special assistant to the President for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Douglas Lute, and Ambassador Karl Eikenberry — all members of Obama's war cabinet, whose "rivalries were compounded by the stubbornness and incompetence at the State Department and USAID" (p. 330).

By mid-2010, conflict was also evident between US Marines and British civilian advisors in north Helmand, as well as between the two militaries. Soon after the collapse of the Musa Qala truce, which the British military made with the insurgents, the top US and NATO commander at the time, General Dan McNeill, told a visiting American official that the British had "made a mess of things in Helmand" (p. 206). In November 2008, US ambassador William Wood told US defense secretary Robert Gates that "the British are not up to the task of securing Helmand" (p. 207). To US officials, it appeared that the US Marines "were bent on expansion while the British were intent on retrenchment" (p. 211). Shortly after the USMC were sent to Helmand, "Nicholson quickly grew irritated with the British approach to countering the insurgency. He abhorred the establishment of front lines that they did not cross, and he recoiled when he saw how Afghan soldiers were segregated in camps on British bases" (p. 208). These disagreements were realized on the field of battle after the US Marines replaced the British in Musa Qala in early-2010. Within 48 hours, the Marines punched through the northern front line and seized a Taliban stronghold (p. 210).

Chandrasekaran tells the story of being shown a wooden sign that was taken from a British base that had been vacated by military engineers. Scrawled upon it were the words: "promise everything, deliver nothing" (p. 210).

Chandrasekaran concludes his extremely interesting and informative book by suggesting that the "COIN strategy" changed after Petraeus replaced McCrystal. He suggests that "the counterterrorism policy of raids and air strikes that Petraeus and other commanders had derided in the 2009 White House strategy review had become the military's principal tool to weaken the insurgency... It seemed that [Petraeus] was defining COIN to include every military tactic in his arsenal except the use of nuclear weapons" (p. 278). Ultimately, he concludes, "our government was incapable of meeting the challenge. Our generals and diplomats were too ambitious and arrogant. Our uniformed and civilian bureaucracies were rife with internal rivalries and go-it-alone agendas. Our development experts were inept. Our leaders were distracted ... For years, we dwelled on the limitations of the Afghans. We should have focused on ours" (p. 331–332).

The challenge facing the current Afghan government is the daunting task of uniting the Afghan people while not repeating the mistakes of the past. Whether the Karzai regime is even genuinely interested in doing so seems increasingly unlikely with every passing day. The tricky balancing act of fostering an overarching national identity, without being perceived as privileging particular identities, requires strong leadership and a willingness to challenge traditional ethnic, linguistic, and religious norms when need be. The goal in every successful new democracy over the last century has been to create a strong sense of national identity coupled with literacy and civic education. The success of Kemal Attaturk in Turkey in the 1920s and 1930s provides both an interesting analogical study in this regard and a cautionary tale of the long and rocky road to effective democracy in a multiethnic state. Successful governments seek to foster the common identity and work transparently and forcefully to remove ethnic and religious aspects of government, although this proves to be far more easily said than done. The likelihood of this kind of transformational change in Afghanistan in 2001 was limited, even without the tragic failings of the Bonn Process. In 2012, after a decade of failed democratic experimentation, it seems remote indeed.

Thomas H. Johnson, Program for Culture and Conflict Studies, Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, CA, thjohnso@nps.edu